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Performance enhancement: identity, surface aesthetics, and the direction of actors in *Yang Yang* 陽陽 (Cheng Yu-Chieh, 2009)

Abstract

Relating the story of a young Eurasian woman training to be an athlete and then an actress, *Yang Yang* (Cheng Yu-Chieh, 2009) focuses insistently on the act of performance. This article argues that the protagonist Yang-Yang is defined by her heterogeneity in relation to conventional markers of identity, occupying a fluid zone in which performativity meets performance. These dynamics are teased out by the film's unusual cinematography, which utilizes extremely shallow focus and fixates relentlessly on surface and foreground. This aesthetic forces the audience into proximity with the actors, and arguably alludes to the protagonist's repression, possibly the result of trauma, which is self-reflexively dramatized when Yang-Yang is asked by a director to release her 'true self'. However, Cheng avoids essentialist notions of identity, and if his protagonist's behaviour might be interpreted in terms of improvisatory tactics, then his own approach similarly creates a space for the spontaneous and unplanned.

Keywords

Cheng Yu-Chieh, performance, Eurasian, Taiwanese cinema, cinematography, identity, shallow focus, sexuality

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Performance enhancement: identity, surface aesthetics, and the direction of actors in *Yang Yang* 陽陽 (Cheng Yu-Chieh, 2009)

Introduction

Relating the story of a young Eurasian woman training to be an athlete and later an actress, *Yang Yang* (2009), written and directed by the Taiwanese filmmaker Cheng Yu-Chieh, focuses insistently on the act of performance. An alleged congruence in the experience of athletic and dramatic training emerges as one of the film's central metaphors as protagonist Zhang Xin-Yang (Sandrine Pinna), known as Yang-Yang, undergoes rigorous training as she strives to enhance her physical and psychological performance. This emphasis is further complicated, however, by the way in which Yang-Yang is defined in terms of her heterogeneity in relation to conventional markers of identity such as race, nationhood, family, and sexuality; she is situated in a fluid zone in which performativity, discussed in terms derived from Butler (1993), meets performance, in the sense of athletic prowess or theatrical self-presentation. But what sets the film apart, I will argue, is the way in which these dynamics are interrogated via an unusual formal approach – Cheng's deployment of what I will term 'surface aesthetics'.

The film opens with Yang-Yang's single mother getting remarried to a high school sports coach. Both the mother and the stepfather are Taiwanese; Yang-Yang's absent biological father, however, is French. Yang-Yang begins living with her new family in an unnamed provincial city, where she is an accomplished track runner at high school. But conflict develops when she sleeps with Shawn (Chang Ruei-Jia), the boyfriend of her stepsister Xiao-Ru (Her Sy-Huoy). The situation deteriorates, and when Yang-Yang tests positive for steroids at a tournament, she decides to abandon her family and sports career. The second half of the film shifts to Taipei, tracing Yang-Yang's attempts to break into the film industry as an actress, assisted by talent manager Ming-Ren (Huang Chien-Wei).

Yang Yang was produced by Khan Lee, the brother of Ang Lee, the first feature on a slate intended to nurture local filmmakers with an eye to the international market. The film has received little critical attention, except from Bloom (2015: 31–71), who discusses its representation of Sino-French identity using the concept of *métissage*, meaning *mélange* or mixture; Yang-Yang is an example of a *métisse*, a person 'who is the product of race-crossing, hybridization, miscegenation, or cross-breeding' (36).¹ Bloom is careful to argue for the broader cultural resonance of the term beyond ethnicity, however, and while Yang-Yang can be discussed in terms of her being Eurasian or mixed-race, neither term quite captures the nuances of the Mandarin term *hunxueer*, nor is this sufficient to evoke the ways in which her identity is presented as heterogenous in a broader sense, created and continually negotiated through difference. This is a subject that Cheng relates to personally; the son of a Taiwanese mother and a Japanese, ethnically Chinese father, he grew up in a bilingual household and it was only at school that he learned Mandarin for the first time. He experienced discrimination due to his Japanese heritage, and subsequently made a great effort to disguise his mixed background (Cheng 2012).

For a Taiwanese filmmaker to investigate the paradoxes of hybrid identity is not in itself unique, nor is it anything new.² Bloom argues that *Yang Yang* 'foregrounds the concept of race' and remains unconvinced by the resulting portrayal: 'Even though Yang-Yang's difference is constructed positively, it is perceived as exclusively physical and therefore entails objectification [...] Cheng repeats

stereotypes of the mixed-race young woman as victimized and eroticized' (2015: 33–4). I think this verdict could be questioned from a formalist perspective. For what arguably sets *Yang Yang* apart is its unrelenting focus on performance, facilitated by the film's unconventional cinematography and unusual narrative structure. Once these elements are taken into consideration, I would query the assumption that *Yang Yang* foregrounds the concept of race. It is important to bear in mind that Cheng is not just a director but – like his protagonist – also a successful film and television actor in Taiwan, with first-hand experience of what screen performance entails.³ Furthermore he has stated that identity issues were only 'a premise' for *Yang Yang* (2009: 30), which I will instead argue foregrounds the concept of performance; the representation of hybrid or mixed-race identity in *Yang Yang* requires consideration in this context.

The film's focus on performance is facilitated by its unusual formal approach. Firstly, the entire film is shot on a handheld camera and predominantly comprises medium close-ups with an extremely shallow depth of field (frequently less than a metre). This withholds background significantly; there are few wide shots, nor many in which the furthest planes of the image are in focus. Shots are long in duration, such as the unbroken take of four minutes that opens the film, but during these the camera generally keeps moving. This prevalence of medium close-ups that are shallow, extended, mobile, and handheld forces the audience into proximity with the actors. The second unusual formal element is *Yang Yang*'s narrative structure. The film is divided into two parts of equal length, with Yang-Yang the protagonist throughout, but Shawn, the male lead in the first half, replaced by Ming-Ren in the second. The initial storyline, which bears traces of high school melodrama, is left largely unresolved, with a new dramatic arc commencing in the film's second half. The title of the film alludes to its dual structure, comprising the repetition of the traditional characters 陽陽. That the female protagonist's name refers to a dual version of the male principle of *yang* is indicative of the ways in which the film blurs traditional ideas regarding gender and sexuality.

Yang Yang is all about surface. Its visuals deny background, focusing relentlessly on the foreground, just as the narrative denies depth and context. Arguing that this approach encourages a sustained conceptual focus on the fluid zone in which performance meets performativity, I will investigate the ways the cinematography and narrative structure work to tease out these dynamics, and furthermore allude to Yang-Yang's repression, which is possibly the result of trauma. This has broader resonance in the Taiwanese context, and facilitates a shift in the discussion as I finally turn to the process of filmmaking itself.

Performance pressure: identity and objectification

Yang-Yang finds herself at the intersection point of multiple lines of identity. Her father was a photographer and her mother a rocker who has now chosen to settle down, marrying a high school athletics coach. Although Xiao-Ru is quietly jealous of Yang-Yang's athletic prowess, the film refuses to blame the adoptive family for the protagonist's unfolding crisis. The stepfather is not the unpleasant ogre of stereotype, but instead makes an effort to welcome her into the family. While various class and cultural differences alienate her from this new environment, Yang-Yang's breakdown appears to be caused by pressures which are more insidious and which she has, over time, internalized.

Primary amongst these, arguably, is the pressure on Yang-Yang's body. She is subjected to an intense sexualized gaze from Shawn, who constantly follows her around, besotted by her beauty. 'I love you', he tells her. 'Nonsense!' she replies,

shocked by the alleged depth of his feelings, which she does not reciprocate. Yang-Yang is sexually attracted to Shawn, however, and in a moment of weakness, agrees to sleep with him. But she does so on one condition: that Shawn must promise, before they have sex, to erase this from his memory afterwards. Shawn agrees. But a few days later, unable to control his desire any longer, he breaks his promise and approaches Yang-Yang, referring to the night they shared together. She responds with a bland smile, asking what he is referring to, and behaves as if nothing had ever happened. Yang-Yang's response seems callous, given that nobody else can hear their conversation; Shawn is her only audience and as such there is no need for her to put on a show. Shocked, Shawn angrily demands 'Can you stop acting?'

But if acting requires a spectator, then one could equally ask Shawn whether he would be able to stop watching. For he is shown masturbating in his room, watching a pornographic video featuring a mixed-race actress. Is he trying to remind himself of Yang-Yang, or does he have a Eurasian fetish? Either way, the ambiguity implies what the film later makes obvious, that Yang-Yang is doubly hit by questionable male desire: objectified sexually as many women are, but also racially as a rare and special hybrid. Tellingly, when Xiao-Ru discovers the video, she instantly makes the connection between the porn actress and her stepsister, anticipating her boyfriend's betrayal before it even happens. In this context, Yang-Yang's denial to Shawn that they ever had sex takes on the quality of a defence mechanism. She has put limitations on the scope of their relationship out of respect for Xiao-Ru, and attempts to escape the pressure of his attention through performance.

These themes are elaborated self-reflexively when Yang-Yang begins her career in modeling and commercials. Ming-Ren knows that in the entertainment industry, being a mix sells, and Yang-Yang is potentially bankable talent. A shot in which she inserts blue contact lenses to conceal her brown irises strikingly emphasizes the ways in which her beauty is conceived in racialized terms. Ang (2014: 127–128) argues that standards of beauty evidence the limitations of arguments for 'post-Asia', noting that 'thousands of young Asians undertake to remove their single eyelids each year to make their faces look more western. The global standard of beauty is still overwhelmingly white, just as the desires of Asian middle-class consumers are still often shaped by western images of cultural modernity'. The publicity poster for *Yang Yang* encapsulates the pressure the protagonist feels in performing a westernized ideal of beauty; she stares numbly ahead, the top half of her iris blue and the lower half brown. Her body has become a mask, and it is a hybrid mask.

Cheng (2012) refers to himself as a *hunxueer* 混血儿, a term which has complex connotations and literally refers to the mixing of blood. One is referred to as a *hunxueer* if one has a parent not of 'Chinese blood' (as with Yang-Yang), but the term can also connote linguistic and national rather than racial difference (as with Cheng). The term was initially pejorative, referring to the offspring of Taiwanese women who had relationships with US soldiers on leave from the Vietnam conflict. Yip (2004: 36) observes that as the bar girls in Hwang Chun-Ming's 1975 story *Little Widows* compete for the attention of the soldiers, they not only learn English but alter their physical appearance, 'dyeing their hair reddish-brown; wearing heavy makeup [...] and even undergoing plastic surgery to make their eyes and noses look more Western'. Thirty years later, Yang-Yang engages in similar behaviour, but the term *hunxueer* has since acquired positive connotations. The desire to 'westernize' one's body no longer implies prostitution, but instead, as Ang's observations indicate, signals middle-class ambitions to adhere to a globalized image of western cultural modernity.⁴ But what does this globalized image entail, in practice? Yang-Yang is

expected to speak French, regardless of whether she can or not. She is made to wear fake blue irises to appeal to a local audience; brown eyes are not acceptable. Similarly when she appears in her first film, her hair is dyed slightly brown; black hair is not acceptable either. Ironically, to attract public attention in the Taiwanese entertainment industry, even Yang-Yang must become just a little whiter.

'She looks just like a foreigner!' a wedding guest enthuses as she meets Yang-Yang in the film's opening scene, 'A little French doll.' If Yang-Yang's mixed identity leads to her objectification, then in the first half of the film, she is subjected to an additional pressure, which again relates to her body. Yang-Yang is a track sprinter and the film returns incessantly to her athletic training and physical prowess, while the school sports ground is the arena in which the stepfather, also the athletics coach, does exert a slow-burning pressure. He stands at the side of the track with a stopwatch, noting the time it takes her to run a lap, barking advice and orders. He complains that her set position is sloppy, which leads her to practice at home, mimicking the posture of an athlete featured in an online video. The coach-stepfather's gaze is clinical rather than sexual, seeking to measure and enhance physical performance in order that his team will enjoy success at an athletics event.

Cheng says that 'in some senses, athletes and actors are alike [...] they spend their lifetime preparing for the stage' (*TIFF* 2009), and like Shawn, the stepfather exerts excessive pressure on Yang-Yang to perform.⁵ When a drug test at a tournament reveals that Yang-Yang has been using steroids, she is stripped of her medals and banned from competing. It is likely that Xiao-Ru is responsible, having handed her a bottle of water prior to the race, taking revenge on her stepsister for her betrayal. However, Yang-Yang does not accuse Xiao-Ru but instead admits to the charge. This leaves open the possibility that she may have taken the steroids herself, but more likely, she sees that the drug test offers her an opportunity to exit the drama unfolding in her personal life.

Yang-Yang's alleged drug abuse attests to her inability to sustain her athletics performance except through artificial means. Similarly, when Shawn breaks his promise to Yang-Yang and brings up the subject of their night together, he is shocked by what he considers to be the sheer artificiality of her response. She not only denies that they had sex, but seems genuinely confused, as if she really doesn't know what he is talking about. This is, arguably, a moment of performance enhancement: Yang-Yang's pretence is simultaneously so convincing, and yet so patently artificial, that it perplexes the audience as much as it perplexes Shawn. Has Yang-Yang, in a manner analogous to the use of steroids in athletics, produced a performance that is too good to be true; a pretence that may be effective, but is desperate and unsustainable, doomed to unravel because Shawn will not play along? Or, from another angle, has Yang-Yang made herself believe that she and Shawn did not have sex; is she acting to such an effective degree that she now believes in the truth of her own performance?

Performing gender: narrative structure

Cheng (2009: 18) recalls an acting coach who said that 'everyone, in every minute, is performing. The only difference between actors and normal people is that actors perform at a conscious level, but normal people do it subconsciously'. Until now, I have referred to Yang Yang's behaviour in terms of performance, rather than performativity, the latter comprised of the acts that constitute the illusion of a stable identity which Butler (1993: 95) argues 'is neither free play nor theatrical self-presentation; nor can it be simply equated with performance'. Though it is tempting to argue that the first half of the film dramatizes performativity, whereas the second half

dramatizes performance, in fact Yang-Yang inhabits a fluid space between the two. When Yang-Yang denies to Shawn that they ever had sex, it is unclear whether or not she is engaging in a conscious pretence.

These ambiguities are illustrated by Cheng's depiction of the male characters, whose behaviour, by contrast, falls firmly into the performative bracket. Shawn is initially the cute and likeable high school jock, typical of many a teen drama. But as his desire for Yang-Yang grows, his behaviour becomes increasingly obsessive. He ultimately follows her to Taipei, desperate to see her before his military service commences. The hyper-masculine characteristics associated with *yang* now unleashed to an extreme degree, Shawn acts like a stalker, aggressively demanding that Ming-Ren give him Yang-Yang's phone number and turning violent when he refuses. In contrast, Ming-Ren empathizes with Yang-Yang and protects her. It is he who takes the blame when a director discovers that she doesn't speak French; he who ensures that she doesn't fall victim to a sleazy producer who preys on young actresses. Yang-Yang ultimately falls in love with Ming-Ren, but he is unable to reciprocate; in a climactic scene it is strongly suggested that he is gay.

The film's unusual narrative structure is central to its performative conception of gender. Is Cheng implying that Ming-Ren, in his affinity for women, his desire to protect Yang-Yang from sexual exploitation, and his ambiguous sexuality, has adopted characteristics traditionally associated with the female principle of *yin* 陰? This comes across strongly in the scenes in which Ming-Ren teaches Yang-Yang how to dance the tango, captured through extended, unbroken shots. Cheng suggests a balance and interdependence with Confucian undertones; the dance is physically demanding, but without the pressure of the athletics; it is erotic, but without the overbearing lust of Shawn. The second half of the film reverses the dynamics of the first. Yang-Yang is now the one doing the looking, with Ming-Ren the object of her gaze. But her desire will remain unfulfilled; their dances are tender and bittersweet.

Cheng (2009: 44) recalls that producer Lee was the first to point out that Shawn's character 'represented my lust' whereas Ming-Ren represented 'my affection'. In narrative terms, Ming-Ren's presence in the second half provides a counterbalance to the lustful Shawn in the first. These complicated dynamics are played out in a climactic scene set in a bar. Shawn angrily confronts Ming-Ren, accusing him of sleeping with Yang-Yang. Losing his cool, Ming-Ren replies 'No, I'd rather fuck you, how about that?' Shawn then launches into a violent assault, which Ming-Ren fights off with surprising force. Erupting out of nowhere, the fight scene is shocking in its sudden intensity, but also in its sexualization. Crying, Shawn lashes out at Ming-Ren, repeatedly grabbing him, as if clinging out of desperation. Both men breathe heavily as Ming-Ren finally subdues Shawn in a choking headlock from behind, rendering him submissive and very nearly killing him; the final release of tension resembles an orgasm.

Shawn's aggressive masculinity (appropriately, he will commence his military service the following week) is shown to be a front for obsessive, desperate desire. In this scene, which actor Chang refers to as 'like a love-making battle' (*TIFF* 2009), he is ultimately made the submissive partner, with feminizing connotations.⁶ Inversely Ming-Ren emerges as the dominant partner. This emphasis on the performative qualities of gender and sexuality is assisted by the structure of the narrative, which prominently features one male character in each half: two different types of masculinity which are ultimately merged and blurred, their constructedness laid bare. The film's dual structure also facilitates an exploration of Yang-Yang's performativity-performance, which is best examined in the context of the film's unusual cinematography.

Cinematography and surface aesthetics

The film's opening shot follows Yang-Yang as she has a conversation with Xiao-Ru in a bathroom, walks through into the reception banquet of her mother's wedding, speaks to Shawn and some guests, then takes a seat as the newlyweds arrive. This all takes place in an unbroken handheld take of four minutes. Despite this scene requiring logistics in its choreography and a large crowd of extras, the camera sustains a claustrophobic focus on Yang-Yang's face and body. The furthest planes of the image are kept out of focus, and only at the end of the shot is the focus pulled, rendering the background sharp as the newlywed couple comes into view. The scene is typical of the rest of the film, in that it is rendered using a medium close-up that is extremely shallow in focus, extended in length, dynamically mobile, and handheld. Bloom (2015: 46) takes issue with this style, arguing that cinematographer 'Jake Pollock and his camera no less than the characters of the film are guilty of obsessing with Yang-Yang's appearance' and she cites a reviewer who suggests that the camera lingers voyeuristically on Pinna's Eurasian features. I think this is a simplification and a misreading of the film's visual approach.

It is worth noting that this kind of camerawork is unusual in the Taiwanese context. Indeed most of Cheng's other films are shot far more classically, following the continuity conventions of tripod-mounted establishing shots cutting into medium close-ups, which are adequately lit, use a varied depth of field, and are focused with precision. The cinematography in *Yang Yang* instead owes a lot to non-classical traditions more readily associated with other countries, perhaps unsurprising given that Pollock is American. Bloom argues that the 'shaky, handheld style evokes French New Wave Cinema' (2015: 56), but the handheld rough-and-readiness might equally be said to recall American indie practice ranging from John Cassavetes to Spike Lee or Mumblecore, for instance, not to mention other traditions such as the Dogme approach. All in turn owe a debt to the aesthetics of documentary and *cinema vérité*. I am less concerned to trace the precise genealogy of *Yang Yang*'s hybrid style, however, which attests above all to the globalized nature of the production, than I am in examining its meaning in this context.

For what matters here, in formalist terms, is the overall rationale for the chosen approach. For *Yang Yang* exudes a compelling shallowness: the cinematography is insistently superficial, entirely fixated on the flatness of surface (the actors in the foreground) at the expense of depth (background and context). This immediately distances the film from the aesthetics of the New Taiwan Cinema, a defining characteristic of which was the static shot making innovative use of deep focus, refined by directors such as Hou Hsiao-Hsien, and Tsai Ming-Liang in the 'second wave' of the movement.⁷ In contrast, the use of shallow focus does not have a consistent place in Taiwanese film traditions, and critics tend to approach it with ambivalence. Observing that *Blue Gate Crossing* (Yee Chin-Yen, 2002) was heavily targeted at the Japanese market, Martin (2007: 141) argues that its shallow-focus visuals represent the 'multicoding' of the Taipei settings, which in a globalized era allows 'multiple, distinct audiences' to 'value-add specificity... customizing this flexible product to cater to their local, specific needs and desires'. *Yang Yang*, on the other hand, was less concerned to maximize revenue. Following a torturous development period, Lee told Cheng: 'Just do whatever you want. I already decided not to care about the box office, so you stop hesitating. Just push it to its extreme' (Cheng 2009: 65). Pollock's cinematography is indeed extreme in its shallowness, and much of the action takes place in nondescript interiors. To this degree, the

multicoding process described Martin relies less on shallow focus *per se* than it does on exterior wide shots filmed in shallow focus; audiences still require some background information about the city and its architecture, however blurry, if they are to value-add their own meanings.

Put simply, the cinematography in *Yang Yang* withholds information. So does the script, which is deliberately present-tense in design: Cheng initially wrote flashback sequences, and scenes giving background context to the story, but these were later cut (Cheng 2009: 64). The audience is instead thrown straight into the drama and is provided with no information about Yang-Yang's past. It is never explained, for instance, where she and her mother lived previously, or what happened to Yang-Yang's father. Similarly, the audience's propositional understanding of what is likely to happen to the characters in the future is repeatedly frustrated. As the film concludes, there is no sense that Yang-Yang's future is clearly mapped out, while other character arcs are left unresolved (the stepfather disappears; we never discover what happened to Xiao-Ru) or do not resolve in a conventional way (Shawn's unexpected outburst). This resolute emphasis on the present, at the expense of the unknowable past and future, again distances the film from the New Taiwan Cinema and its second wave, long associated with the dramatization of time.⁸ *Yang Yang* instead strives to capture an impression of narrative immediacy, congruent with the cinematography, which captures surface at the expense of depth.

Bloom argues that in addressing the theme of hybridity, Cheng oversimplifies and 'focuses our attention on the character of Yang-Yang rather than creating an explicitly broader portrait, expanding beyond the individual to the nation' (2015: 39–40). The cinematography would appear to be a case in point; Pollock's camera literally and visually focuses on the narrow, instead of expanding to incorporate the broad. But given that this is quite evidently and deliberately the case, is it not worth asking why the filmmakers do this? Bloom's argument is problematic because it assumes firstly, that Cheng was primarily interested in the theme of hybridity, and secondly, that his insistent focus on a central character was misguided. But from another perspective, the cinematography achieves exactly what it set out to do: it places the audience in close proximity to the actors, which pushes performance, quite literally, to the forefront of the drama. While this is thematically resonant with Cheng's interest in performativity, *Yang Yang* conceptualizes the relationship between performance and surface aesthetics in a far more dynamic manner, and does so in the context of a narrative conceived in terms of repression.

Repressed performance: trauma and repetition

After spraining her ankle during training, Yang-Yang visits a hospital, where she is shocked to see a photo of herself on the wall. It is an image of her training in athletics, a temporary exhibition by a photographer whom we later learn is her father. This photo instantly causes trouble. Within minutes of seeing it, Yang-Yang is behaving in a self-destructive manner, kissing Shawn in the car park and thus initiating the drama of infidelity. Later she sobs in her bedroom, choking herself to keep quiet, ensuring that her pain goes undetected by her mother and adoptive family. In this context, Yang-Yang's decision to sleep with Shawn appears not only masochistic, but involuntary. The photo prompts behaviour that appears to be consistent with post-traumatic stress disorder, the source of which involves Yang-Yang's absent father.

Ma (2015) argues that much Taiwanese popular culture is defined by an urge to displace national trauma, which he accounts for in the island's abandonment by the Japanese, its decoupling from mainland China, and its banishment from the United

Nations. He analyzes several youth films released around the same time as *Yang Yang*, including *Monga* (Doze Niu, 2010) and *Din Tao* (Kai Feng, 2012), which all feature characters who are ‘literally or figuratively, fatherless’ and ‘reflect Taiwan’s sense of unease over its conditions; the sworn brothers’ pattern of long repression and violent explosion charts the island’s own psychic disturbance’ (56). Yang-Yang similarly lacks a father, feels alienated from those around her, and is psychologically unstable. However, Cheng (who appears in *Monga*, playing a teacher) treats these themes far more critically than his contemporaries, as evidenced by his short film *Unwritten Rules* (2012), a comedy in which a group of filmmakers attempt to shoot a scene whilst avoiding the enormous national flag that is attached to the wall of their ill-chosen location. The flag cannot appear in their film for fear of making it unsellable in mainland China, so the director orders his crew to remove it. As it is torn away, the director realizes, to his horror, that something worse lies underneath: an old nationalist slogan pasted over a map of the mainland announcing ‘we will unite China!’ The film wryly dramatizes the official suppression of Taiwan’s historical memory, recalling what Johnson (1994: 206) has termed the policy of ‘organized forgetting’ that the KMT pursued after the war. *Unwritten Rules* suggests that this policy has now been internalized as self-censorship, and achieves this, as in *Yang Yang*, via a focus on surface aesthetics. The flat backdrop of the national flag is apparently superficial, but disguises hidden depths.

Whether or not we conceive these dynamics in terms of trauma depends, perhaps inevitably, on our definition of trauma. Ma (2015: 12–13) argues for the term to be ‘calibrated in the East Asian context’ to take account of ‘the slow burn and simmer in Taiwan’s alienation’ as well as ‘specific, identifiable events’. Caruth (1995: 153) argues for the latter, that trauma is the confrontation with an unexpected or horrifying event that ‘cannot be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge’ and thus ‘continually returns, in its exactness, at a later time’. If Yang-Yang has experienced a traumatic event, then it is neither identified nor directly represented, but her compulsion to repeat may well evidence traumatized behaviour. For the film’s second half retraces some major narrative beats of the first in the manner of a palimpsest, as if forcing Yang-Yang into an involuntary performance of the earlier drama. There is, for instance, repetition of bodily injury (11 minutes into Part 1, Yang-Yang gets shampoo in her eye, which Shawn helps her remove; 11 minutes into Part 2, she injures her knuckles, which Ming-Ren attends to) and a reenactment of sexual objectification (25 minutes into Part 1, Shawn masturbates, watching the porn star; 25 minutes into Part 2, a producer attempts to seduce Yang-Yang).

In dramatizing Yang-Yang’s compulsion to repeat, the film blurs easy distinctions between performance and performativity. The sexualized fight between Shawn and Ming-Ren occurs at the same point in the film’s second half as the sex scene between Shawn and Yang-Yang in the first (about 35 minutes in). Yang-Yang is practicing baseball when she agrees to sleep with Shawn, on the condition that he erase it from his memory afterwards, a pre-emptive policy of organized forgetting. Her tense exertion with the baseball evidences an excess of energy; she needs to release psychological tension. They have sex and following her orgasm, the shot is held for a long time as Yang-Yang starts to cry, bites her fingers nervously, and tells Shawn she loves him; words obviously meant for an unknown other. It’s an uncomfortably long shot, voyeuristically lingering. The room is darkly lit, resulting in grainy overexposure and focus problems. This is where the film’s surface aesthetic most eloquently dramatizes Yang-Yang’s psyche: its lack of depth, its avoidance of information, its withholding of the past, its blurred edges and noise.

The implication is of a surface designed to conceal depth, comparable to the national flag in *Unwritten Rules*; when Yang-Yang cries, she allows previously repressed emotions to the surface. Cheng returns to this theme in his acclaimed TV mini-series *Days We Stared At The Sun* (2010–11) which, like *Yang Yang*, is a genre-breaker. It commences as a high school melodrama before shockingly shifting gear in the last two episodes, as its teenage protagonist Hao-Yuan responds to various pressures (economic, political, social, sexual) by enacting a violent and nihilistic revenge. Though less stark in its conclusion, *Yang Yang* similarly dramatizes the unsustainable containment of pressure, as demonstrated by Shawn's unexpectedly violent explosion and the release of Yang-Yang's tension during sex.

Further to this, *Yang Yang* self-reflexively dramatizes a type of film direction that encourages the unleashing of a repressed self. 'I hope you can show your true feelings', the French director, Laurent, says to Yang-Yang prior to the shooting of a climactic scene. Although the involvement of a French production company in the Taiwanese context is unremarkable (see Martin 2007: 132; Wilson 2015: 23), it hardly seems coincidental that Yang-Yang's father is also French, and he would also be about the same age as Laurent.⁹ If her father, a photographer, is responsible for her malaise, then the director requests that she draw on this experience in order to give an effective screen performance; but significantly, Yang-Yang dislikes the film at first. 'I think the story sucks', she tells Ming-Ren. Only snippets are given, but the plot concerns a young Eurasian woman seeking to overcome her conflicted feelings towards her absent father. Keen to fend off Ming-Ren's suggestion that the film bears a resemblance to her own life, Yang-Yang claims that she doesn't recognize herself in the role for the reason that 'I wouldn't go looking for my father'.

Yang-Yang is perhaps justified in her misgivings. The film is conceived by a western man who relies on a translator, who operates on the assumption that Yang-Yang, as a Eurasian woman, has had experiences that reflect those of his protagonist. She rejects this, however: 'But I've never experienced that'. Moreover, Laurent's demand that Yang-Yang release her 'true feelings' evokes her essential self, that core of identity which Butler (1993) argues is mistakenly held to motivate behaviour. For if Cheng seems sympathetic to his characters having a repressed self, then this is not the same as an essential self. Shawn's violent outburst, for instance, allows us to peel away a layer, but what we find underneath – chaotic sexual ambiguity – confuses rather than clarifies our understanding of the character. As an actress, Yang-Yang seems even less reachable. In her study of intercultural theatre actors, Nascimento (2010: 56) argues that the 'assumption that an actor's ethnicity and performance behavior must coincide reveals the spectator's lack of awareness – or unwillingness to accept – that a trained actor embodies a behavior that is all but natural'.

This reflects Cheng's own acknowledgement that he and Pinna, both *hunxueer*, are expected to make films about identity issues even though 'we might not care about our background that much anymore' and might even exploit it 'as a tool for making money' (Cheng 2009: 30–31). The act of performance itself destabilizes the assumptions about identity that first drew the audience into the cinema. For as Nascimento argues, once we focus on embodiment rather than representation, on the phenomenal experience of the intercultural actors themselves, it 'becomes quite simple to see that, *for the actor*, the difference between intra- and intercultural practice is truly tenuous. Acting is the art of simultaneously playing/being Self and Other, so how is the actor's hybrid identity constructed? How is it different on- and offstage?' (2010: 57–58). Taking this up, I will now turn to the ways in which Cheng directs his performers on set, remaining ever mindful that he, too, is an actor.

Performing direction: spontaneity and improvisatory tactics

In the climactic scene of the film-within-the-film, Yang-Yang's character discovers that her absent, now deceased, father secretly took photos of her for many years, as an expression of his enduring love. Yang-Yang's reconciliation with her father can only ever be figurative, but despite her earlier misgivings, she is moved to tears as the scene is shot. Pollock's camera follows her as she walks through Laurent's set, delivering her performance. No attempt is made to adopt the perspective or angle of the French director's crew; the camerawork does not distinguish between Yang-Yang and the character she is playing. The scene instead gives the impression of capturing spontaneous action as it plays out. Yang-Yang does not appear to have planned or rehearsed this performance; is she improvising?

In structural terms this is interesting; this scene occurs at the same point in the film's second half (40 minutes in) as her denial to Shawn, in the first half, that they ever had sex. Is her behaviour the unconscious, performative result of repression, or instead a consciously improvised performance – a pragmatic response to circumstance? In this respect Cheng has perhaps inherited the concern of earlier Taiwanese *auteurs* that hybridity has 'less to do with liberating transgressions than with tactical strategies for survival in an increasingly complex world' (Yip 2004: 228). When the drug test reveals that Yang-Yang has used steroids, for instance, it is likely that she has been tricked into consuming them by the vengeful Xiao-Ru. But Yang-Yang seizes the moment, taking advantage of the chance to escape the conflict unfolding with Shawn, and falsely confesses to drug abuse. She assesses the situation and – for want of a better metaphor – runs with it.

If Yang-Yang's behaviour can be conceived in terms of improvisatory tactics, then the film's cinematography was in fact designed with this kind of acting in mind. Cheng (2009: 106) explains that the majority of the scenes were shot in one take, a decision that was taken early on in the shoot, following a suggestion by Pollock. Thus the particularly long four-minute opening shot was in fact the rule rather than the exception; much of the other material was later edited for purposes of rhythm (*TIFF* 2009). Cheng offered a rationale for this when asked, at the Taipei Film Festival, whether there was any 'meaning' to his use of tight medium close-ups:

Actually no. I didn't want many rehearsals, we knew roughly what would happen next, and shot what we anticipated would happen next. I would prefer a situation where filmmakers and actors aren't so sure about what was going to happen. Of course everyone has a script, and one of the priorities is to interpret it. So for every scene with Sandrine, if it was in a room, I would ask the crew outside to clean the set, to get prepared, because the camera might come out of the room at the end... So why did we shoot in this way? It's because we wanted to capture what happened in front of us, to capture that kind of transient sense of reality (*TIFF* 2009).

Cheng's direction is neither conventional nor improvisatory, but instead propositional: he knows roughly what is going to happen, but isn't so sure. He seeks to give actors both the space (cleaning the set) and the time (letting the camera roll without cutting) to perform in a way that is spontaneous. This poses a huge challenge for the cinematographer; one reviewer wrote that Pollock's 'fluid lens moves among characters as if it is an invisible performer capturing, receiving and responding to nuanced gestures and fleeting emotions' (Ho 2009: 16), while Cheng recalled 'a camera moving like a hen leading some chicks, with five or six people running after it'. In this complex dance, he sought to give his cast and crew 'a stage to bring into

full play' and as a result 'many of our characters' lines are improvised, out of the blue, during performance' (TIFF 2009).

Although some of the lines are improvised, the overall drama and dialogue is not; the analogy of the stage instead suggests a freedom inscribed within certain limits. In this context, Pollock's cinematography is perhaps most reminiscent of the visual style pioneered by John Cassavetes, another actor-director, in films such as *Faces* (1968) and *A Woman Under the Influence* (1974), with which an American DP working in the independent sector would doubtless be familiar. *Yang Yang* similarly prioritizes performance via the deployment of handheld cameras, freewheeling close-ups, grainy overexposure, and faces going in and out of focus; an apparently amateurish approach which, though in fact heavily scripted, gives the impression of being unplanned.

Cheng himself is more scathing, however, referring to his own direction as 'unprofessional', 'arrogant and irresponsible' and 'incompetent' (Cheng 2009: 18; 44). For him, his approach and the resulting performances did not arise out of any plan or design, but instead emerged from his own insecurities as a director; his writings on the production process (Cheng 2009) recount his depressive mindset and the impact of additional personal pressures on his work, which seem to have knocked his confidence. He articulates his approach to directing in terms of acting:

I realize that the way I work as a director is more like an actor. I don't just stand at an objective and safe position, telling the actors and crew what I want. Basically I instead perform an invisible character and let it be part of the story, through which I directly affect other actors' emotions (Cheng 2009: 18).

Seeking to enhance the actors' performances in the tango scene between Yang-Yang and Ming-Ren, he went even further:

I crossed the line and allowed myself to be replaced completely by the character played by me... I took advantage of the trust and relationship that my actors and DP had in me, which affected their emotions, so I could directly capture those off-screen emotions in my film (Cheng 2009: 18).

Cheng, like Yang-Yang, is playing a character that is a version of himself. The cast and crew respond emotionally to what they see as his 'real' self, but they are in fact responding to a persona that he has constructed in order to take deliberate advantage of them. 'This was unprofessional, I admit', he acknowledges, and exactly what was said to the actors is kept private, but he suggests that the resulting performances were 'real, not performed' (Cheng 2009: 18). Many reviewers agreed, with one remarking that Pinna's performance 'seems disturbingly real at times, to the point her vulnerability becomes palpably unnerving' (Lee 2009).

Although the overlap of actor and character is suggestive of Method acting, rehearsals were minimal, and Cheng's way of working lacks the structure and discipline associated with Method direction. Moreover, his approach contradicts the assumption of a stable notion of ethnicity implicit in Stanislavsky's theory 'that the actor's inner self – past, character analysis, and fixed identity – is the determinant of the actor's portrayal', which has frequently been criticized for its logocentrism (Stinespring 2000: 99). Cheng perhaps has more in common with the alternative Method tradition developed by Sanford Meisner which emphasizes 'spontaneous behavioral reactions and doings' at 'the moment of performance' (100–101). But any such commonality is likely unintended. Cheng's conception of performance is rooted not in the theory of western drama schools, but, as I have argued, in filmmaking practice itself. In this respect, it is instructive that one of his favourite directors, Koreeda Hirokazu, is also known for structuring his productions in a way that prioritizes performance, encouraging acting that appears spontaneous and unplanned.

Cheng's approach yields impressive results in the tango sequence, but it was not necessarily reliable. For after stepping in with offscreen provocations in this manner, then there were implications for stepping out again. 'Sometimes I would botch it,' he says, 'I couldn't explain what I wanted and let my actors feel that the director had disappeared when they truly needed me. I would hate myself in these moments and felt that I used and betrayed them' (Cheng 2009: 19). Cheng's self-described 'performance' on set could be seen as a strategy designed to mask his insecurities; he seems aware of the fine line between a director allowing his performers freedom, and simply not directing at all. As an actor himself, he was able to compare his style to directors 'who can be relied upon, who can give actors help when they need it', comparing himself unfavourably to Wang Xiao-Di, who directed him in the 2009 TV series *Police Et Vous* (Cheng 2009: 45).

Conclusion

This article has argued that the *Yang Yang*'s shallow-focus cinematography and narrative fixate relentlessly on surface and foreground, an aesthetic which forces the audience into proximity with Yang-Yang and arguably alludes to her repression, possibly the result of trauma. But if this suggests that the protagonist is unconsciously performative, then her behaviour might equally be interpreted in terms of improvisatory tactics: the character occupies a fluid zone in which performativity meets performance. Cheng's own approach as a director similarly creates a space for the spontaneous and unplanned. During the making of *Yang Yang*, he felt pressure to enhance his performance, and responded with improvisatory tactics, encouraging a productive blurring of directing and acting, onscreen and offscreen behaviour. Unlike the processes of identity negotiation favoured by many cultural theorists, improvisation has as its linguistic root the unforeseen: negotiation without prep, rehearsal or research. It relies on resourcefulness, creativity and quick thinking. The film's running metaphor is apt, with Yang-Yang as with Cheng himself. There is agency there, to be sure, but an agency that constantly needs to keep on its toes.

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Endnotes

¹ Wilson (2015, 41–44) similarly argues for the usefulness of 'East-West hybrid cinema' as a conceptual model that avoids direct reference to the contested terms 'national' and 'transnational'.

² See Yip (2004, 66–68), and Hong (2011, 13–31), who argues that Taiwanese cinema was paradoxically '*transnational* from the beginning, despite not having a national film history' and was comprised of 'a hybrid mixture of film texts' (25).

³ Cheng's credits include *Police Et Vous* (Wang Xiao-Di, 2009), *Monga* (Doze Niu, 2010), and *Design 4 Love* (Hung-i Chen, 2014).

⁴ See Bloom (2015, 52–55).

⁵ Her Sy-Huoy, who plays Xiao-Ru, was a real-life athlete.

⁶ These connotations are further assisted by Chang's star persona; he came to prominence in the popular gay melodrama *Eternal Summer* (Leste Chen, 2006).

⁷ See Yip (2004, 178–179) and Hong (2011, 124–126).

⁸ See Wilson (2015, 98–106), Lu (2007, 95–115), and Yip (2004, 69–130).

⁹ For a more detailed discussion of the ways the French are conceived in the film, see Bloom (2015).